

The Handmaid's Tale: The Carving Out of Feminist Space in Margaret Atwood's Novel

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Introduction

In Canada the modern feminist movement started in the early 1970s. It was an outgrowth of the women's liberation movement of America of the late sixties. The women's liberation movement in Canada showed women as a severely oppressed group. This movement, as in the USA, demanded equality for women in all social, economic, cultural, judicial, and sexual matters. The newly enlightened women launched a systematic campaign against economic discrimination, violence against women, and sexual ignominy. It is the patriarchal set up which reinforced the discriminatory treatment of women. Liz Stanley and Sue Wise observe that the essence of feminism is its idea about the personal, its insistence on the validity of women's experience and "its argument that an understanding of women's expression can be gained only through understanding and analysing everyday life, where oppression as well as everything else is grounded." Such oppression and tyranny affecting a woman are fundamentally the basic themes of the feminist movement.

Discussing the role of the writer in society Atwood remarks that the writer tends to concentrate more on life, not as it ought to be, but as it is, as the writer feels it, experiences it: "Writers are eye witnesses, I witness."

In her writing Atwood is concerned with the weak as against the strong victim versus the victimizer. A key word in any Atwood discussion is "survival". By survival Atwood does not mean continuity of mere physical existence, but a striving for dignity in the battle with society and circumstances. Almost all her protagonists are victimized - either by man or by authority or by a particular social environment. Atwood examines the place of women in modern society. She explores her identity in a commercialized, technological age. On the question of moral perfection traditional society has demanded of women, Atwood says thus:

Women are still expected to be better than men, morally that is, even by women, even by some branches of the women's movement and if you are not an angel, if you happen to have human feelings, as most of us do, especially if you display any kind of strength or power, creative or otherwise, then you are not human. You are worse than human, you are a witch, a Medusa, a destructive power scary monster.

Atwood allows her women protagonists the imperfection a normal human being possesses. She criticises the social system that assigns roles to the sexes and labels them as inferior or superior. Her portrayal is of a woman concerned with selfhood and with that vigorous aspiration deviating from norms of subservience to the dominant gender.

A woman writer is seen as an aberration, neurotically denying herself the delights of sex.

Regarding the male attitude towards the female and vice versa, Margaret Atwood says thus:

Why do men feel threatened by women? I asked a male friend of mine... "I mean," I said, "Men are bigger, most of the time, they can run faster, struggle better and they have on average a lot more money and power. They are afraid of women laugh at them," "he said, "Undercut their world over," then I asked women... Why do women feel threatened by men?" "they are afraid of being killed."

From this Atwood came to the conclusion that men and women are different in the range and scope of their threatenability. It is this threatenability, the victim-victimizer relationship, that Atwood explores in her novels. Her new woman refuses to be a victim, but in the process of refusal she faces the indignities that are showered upon women.

Yet another important feature of Margaret Atwood's fiction is that it is post-modern in its use and abuse of traditional literary conventions, including novelistic realism. Also, as some one "formed" in the 60's, Atwood is at ease with the political dimension of post-modernism. In the early seventies she was best known for her Canadian nationalism and for her feminism. Her short and powerful lyric poems were written alongside her long narrative pieces almost as a kind of allegory of the tension between product and process that persists in her work. An advantage of the narrative as a form of investigation for a political writer like Atwood is that while poetry is often seen as the place where language is renewed, the novel has been seen as a more powerful and appropriate vehicle for social and ideological critique. The novel posits greater common assumption between reader and writer or it carries a didactic desire to create that commonality. But if the novel is written in metafiction, a new tension between didactic motivation and the more inward-directed self-reflexivity is introduced.

The Handmaid's Tale is an important novel in the Atwood canon. We are constantly made aware of the fact that a fictive world is created and our participation in that world involves us in the process of creation which we share with the author. Here is the core of Atwood's postmodernism. With the participation comes the responsibility – political and moral; public and personal. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a novel where politics and metafictional parody meet in a nightmarish projection of both history and its modes of narration. The oral/written paradox appears in the frame tale. Here it is again the female who is associated with the oral and male with the written. A simultaneous mixture of involvement and distance constitutes this postmodern novel. Self-conscious about the fact that this is a dystopia created out of words associated with feminist rhetoric, consumerist advertising, literalist fundamentalist ranting, *The Handmaid's Tale* offers us a world carried to an extreme. It gives us a vision of the implications of current ideological trends. Here men still rule and women still collude. It would not be hard to read this novel in terms of the extreme of the imposition of a certain kind of female order. Women are respected above all for their mothering function. Women burn pornography and punish deviation from the norm. There exist an Underground Femaleroad. Gilead may be patriarchal in form, but in content much is matriarchal. *The*

Handmaid's Tale is an overtly political fable. The narrator self-consciously tries to tell her story. It is a true one, but the narrator realises that it is ordered, constructed, and fictionalised. The protagonist tries to become pregnant in order to retain her position in her society as one of the rare fertile women. The travails of creativity are thus both narrative and physical. Atwood once declared that "fiction is the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community." Atwood thus is one of the most important novelists belonging to the postmodern phase. She is at the centre of the Canadian imagination. Survival for her means that there is no dominance or submission but that all individuals are free to determine their lives as equals.

The Handmaid's Tale: The Carving Out Of Feminist Space

The Handmaid's Tale is Margaret Atwood's international award-winning best seller. It is a critique of female brutalization articulated in *Bodily Harm*. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a cautionary and poignant tale that dramatizes a futuristic, bleak, totalitarian society where women are denied the basic rights. The novel is a kind of anti-Utopia of the not-too-distant future as reflected through the voice of Offred, a handmaid and one of the victims in the theocracy.

Patriarchy and colonialism are both power structures which operate on similar principles. Colonialism may well be seen as a paradigm of patriarchy in feminist literary discourse. This is because gender relations provide the "blue-print for all other power relationships" and are "the model for power relations between generations, socio-economic classes, relations, racial and ethnic groups as well as between imperial powers and their colonies."

Both patriarchy and colonialism involve relationships of domination and suppression, assumed superiority and imposed inferiority, where the dominated is forced to take up the oppressed, exploited victim position. Both in patriarchy and colonialism, various subversive tactics may be resorted to by the dominated group – open rebellion, secret revolt, formation of defiant groups, outward submission accompanied by a slow carving out of inner independent space, acts of subversion and sabotage, and the creation of free space through written or oral language composition.

According to Northrop Frye, Canada is "the only country left in the world which is a pure colony, colonial in psychology, as well as mercantile economics." Just as colonial power structures seem to be built into the collective unconscious of Canada, patriarchal power structures too have left their impact on the female psyche. A sensitive and consciously self-aware writer like Margaret Atwood exposes these power structures and their effects on both those who exercise power and those who are subjected to it. While colonial domination is a recurrent theme with the Canadian male writer, women writers see colonialism as a metaphor of the gender power-struggle. In Linda

Hutcheon's opinion, "In all her writing, Atwood shows herself to be the tireless exposed and exposes of cultural clichés and stereotypes, in particular of those that affect women." In *Handmaid's Tale*, "the colonies" are mentioned in a purely negative sense as a symbol of exploitation, isolation and alienation, where people are used as objects or functions.

Atwood's dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, imitates the epistolary form with a slight difference: it is recorded and not written - a cumbersome exercise in the twentieth century with all technical amenities at our command. Writing or recording,

both a form of speech, is denied to our protagonist in the theocratic society of Gilead, situated in South Dakota, U.S., and established by religious fanatics. The protagonist's "own story" recalled from memory is transcribed by Professor Pieixoto, an activist. It cannot be the authentic version, yet it reaches us. It may be controlled and altered by patriarchy, but it is surely an approximation to and reconstruction of the protagonist's version.

Offred, the protagonist in *The Handmaid's Tale*, escapes from the Republic of Gilead to the Underground Female Road to tell her tale of victimization. Freedom of speech is a capital offence in Gilead. She uses "language" as a means of communication to unlock her inner feelings and bitter experiences. Language is as well a "subversive-weapon" to tell her tale. Her tale addresses itself to the marginalization of women. She tells her tale with a sense of commitment to expose how dignity and autonomy of women are neglected by anarchic and repressive societies like the Republic of Gilead. She also suggests ways and means to surmount the barriers to woman's individuality and autonomy. Offred's power of word triumphs despite the barriers constructed by time and man.

Offred, the protagonist, now the handmaid of Commander Fred, was picked up as she, along with her husband and daughter, was attempting to escape from this country. Her husband is probably dead and the daughter quite possibly is in one of the Morality Schools and is being adequately trained either to become the wife of some unknown Angel or to serve a Commander as a future handmaid. In either case, her womb is to be colonized. Like Rennie, the central character in *Bodily Harm*, Offred is placed in Red Centre for training. Such "speculative literature," as Atwood defines it, is built up from the experiences of the past and the present and extended to the future.

Despite the strict regimentation at their training centre, the handmaids communicate with one another "through whispers, lip reading and touch, while lying flat, each in her own bed." The protagonist manages to communicate with her former friend Moira who also arrives at the same training centre. Despite the ban on all communication between the handmaids and the Marthas, one of the housekeepers, Cora develops a liking for Offred and is even willing to lie for her once. For Offred, it is a triumph in itself, a subversive carving out of female space.

Offred, the narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale*, is one of the several "handmaids" who, because of their "viable ovaries" (135) are to be recruited for "breeding purposes" of the "Commanders of the Faith" who are childless as a result of their wives' infertility. The Republic of Gilead is openly misogynistic, in both its theory and practice. The state reduces the handmaids to the slavery status of being mere "breeders." As Offred says, "We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (128). If the handmaid becomes pregnant, the child she bears will be regarded as that of the Commander and his wife. After the delivery the handmaid has to surrender the child to her mistress. So the handmaid must act as surrogate mother and bear a child for the aging Commander with the collusion of his barren wife by a literal enactment of the device invented by Rachel in the Bible. In this way the handmaid is desexed and dehumanized.

The Handmaid is proclaimed an "unwoman" if she does not succeed by the end of her third two-year posting. The dire alternative for her is the punishment of

banishment to the colonies where women clean up radioactive waste as slave labourers. Thus, the dictates of state policy in Gilead relegate sex to a saleable commodity exchanged for mere minimal survival. In contrast, male sterility in Gilead is unthinkable. As Offred says, "there are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law" (57). So women are judged by double standards of morality in respect of infertility.

Offred in her autobiography, *The Handmaid's Tale*, "sets before us ... her desperate struggle to reconstruct her being across an all but unbridgeable, violent severing of time before and after the imposition of Gilead. To do this she must insist upon her own script, in a world where her voice has been erased and her role in life rescripted for her by others, where her meaning, use and plot are totally controlled by other interest and forces." Despite the call of authority to forget, to be silent and thus remain effaced, pilotless, Offred's response is defiant. Her scripting of the self through memory and language proclaims the defeat of Gilead's monologic authoritarian discourse. In this venture, Gilead is the fountainhead of all activity. Every action of Offred, like having a physical relationship with Nick, every symbol like playing of the scrabble, every image like that of the wall, square, church, shops, the use of Bilhah's myth, the hint of chosen words like 'ceremony', 'salvagings', and 'participation' (the execution of male offenders through the participation of women by way of lynching), demonstrates a poet's control of structures, symbols, and words. Atwood is more a poet than a fiction writer and her initial orientation as a poet has enriched her style. Her protagonist, explicitly and more often implicitly, sings her music that is perfectly audible and comprehensible to the discerning ear. "*The Handmaid's Tale* though written in the tight-lipped minimalist style that has become an Atwood trade-mark, conceals an ultimate insight that is far more complex and illusive."

When Gilead first came into being, the very first step of the new regime had been to freeze women's credit cards and bank accounts and take away their jobs and property rights, thus destroying their financial independence which is the primary requisite in any true liberation of women. With the loss of her job, the protagonist had felt stripped of her independence and individuality, perceiving herself as a doll-wife. Moreover, the state cancels the original names of the handmaids in order to erase their former identity and labels them according to names of their Commanders. It is metaphoric of the silencing of women that their names have been given by the state.

Hence "Offred," the narrator's relational naming, is not a name but a tag that she wears to signify that she is the handmaid "of Fred."

The separation of women according to their functions in Gilead promotes their fragmentation. The wives are mainly decorative in functions and are dressed in blue. The middle-aged housekeepers called Marthas are dressed in green. When they become weak and sick and cease working, they are deported to the colonies. The handmaids, dressed in red, are young women in their twenties or thirties and serve as child-bearers to elderly childless Commanders. In addition to the handmaids, the Republic of Gilead offers its own state-sponsored brand of sex prostitutes called the Jezebels whose sole function is to entertain foreign delegations. The Aunts, the police women of Gilead who are clad in paramilitary khaki, train the handmaids. Thus women are completely controlled by men and are arranged in a hierarchy of value in Gilead. Therefore Offred's

The Handmaid's Tale posits a "future culture in which such feminist dreams have been replaced by fundamentalist patriarchy that divides women into rigid categories based on function."

Offred, the handmaid, in her "reduced circumstances" (99) obeys "ritualized subjugation" to the ruling elite because she knows what the statement "Give me children, or else ... die" (Genesis) means. She is compelled to discharge her duties as a handmaid knowing fully well the consequences. Under the pressure of terrifying alternatives, Offred feels, "I resign my body freely to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am object" (268). Offred is forced into pregnancy tests every month. The doctor who examines Offred and other handmaids periodically for signs of pregnancy never sees their faces. The Commander who attempts to impregnate her once a month is indifferent to her appearance. As appearance is unimportant for the commanders, the handmaids are not given face cream. Their bath is regulated by others. Their eating of food is not chosen by them. For minor offences like reading, their arms and legs which are seen as inessential for reproduction, are ruthlessly chopped off.

According to Offred, language in the Republic of Gilead is officially forbidden because the ruling class recognizes the power of words as weapons that can free the people from bondage. In Gilead only the ruling class has access to books. As part of the training, the handmaids are required to recite the Biblical injunctions which are distorted to reinforce their submissiveness. Biblical and Marxist teachings are blended and distorted in the effort to brainwash the handmaids: "From each says the slogan, according to her ability; to each according to his needs. We recited that three times, after dessert. It was from the Bible, or so they said St. Paul again in Acts" (111). Offred's ironic comment "or so they said" casts doubt on the authority of the statement and forces us to note also the use of the pronouns "her" and "his" as yet another evidence of the oppression of women in Gilead. So Offred questions the authority of patriarchal language which comes from the reservoir of male discourse. Women in Gilead are denied books, paper, pens, and even scrabble is a clandestine activity. Shops are identified by pictures rather than by names "they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us" (24). Thus, words are themselves forbidden in a society governed by The Word.

Offred recalls her visceral connections to the husband and daughter from whom she has been so abruptly separated. She mourns a holistic love for them.

No body dies from lack of sex. It's lack of love we die from. There is nobody here I can love, all the people I could love are dead or elsewhere ... Where they are or what their names are now? They might as well be nowhere, as I am for them. I too an a missing person. From time to time I can see their faces, against the dark, flickering like th images of saints ... I can conjure them. (97)

In this way, Offred endorses a genuine and holistic love for her husband and daughter. She hopes she will receive a message that keeps her alive.

It is through Nick, the Commander's chauffeur, that Offred associates herself with underground network which shifts her from "being a helpless victim to being a sly, subversive survivor." Ultimately Offred is rescued by Nick, the Private Eye and the

Underground May day resistance group who have come in the "black van." Nick calls her by her real name and says, "It's May day. Go with them" (275).

The Handmaid's Tale is not presented as history or *his* story, i.e. a story from a man's point of view, but as her story, the story of Offred, narrated by herself orally. The narration is made off and on, not chronologically, into a recording machine and preserved in tapes. Annis Pratt's generalization about women's fiction could perhaps be applied to Offred's narrative: "Women's fiction manifests alienation from normal concepts of time and space precisely because the presentation of time by persons on the margins of day-today life inevitably deviates from ordinary chronology.

The novel concludes with an Epilogue, supposedly placed about 200 years after Offred. The Epilogue presents the male point of view of the woman's story, which had formed the main narrative. This becomes the frame or perspective against which the novel acquires depth. There is much ambivalence in the Epilogue. The Epilogue gives hints and clues regarding the main story, in case the reader has missed them, and yet it laughs at critical interpretations of the story by posterity.

There is also ambivalence of another kind in this novel. There are moments when feminism itself seems to be viewed ambivalently and a woman's culture is seen to be not an unmixed blessing. This is seen, for example, in Chapter 21, in the description of the natural childbirth, in which Wives, Aunts and Handmaids all participate. Offred apostrophizes her feminist mother in imagination.

In all of Atwood's fiction formalist concerns (such as parody and metafictional self-reflexivity) are never separate from political ones, and this is largely because of the very postmodern paradox that ties them together. In Atwood's own constantly repeated terms, this is the paradox of art as both product and process, as both artifact and part of life.

Conclusion

The Handmaid's Tale is a critique of female brutalization, a theme articulated in *Bodily Harm*. It is a dystopian novel by Atwood which imitates the epistolary form with a slight difference. It is recorded, not written. The protagonist's "own story" recalled from memory is transcribed by Prof. Pieixto, an activist. The narrative may be controlled and ordered by patriarchy, but it is surely an approximation and reconstruction of the protagonist's version. Offred, the protagonist, uses language as a means of communication to unlock her inner feelings. Her tale involves an exposure of how dignity and autonomy of women are negated by anarchic and repressive societies. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a piece of 'speculative literature' built up out of the experiences of the past and present and extending to the future. The novel concludes with an Epilogue which gives us hints about the main story and yet it exposes the critical interpretations of the story by posterity. There is yet another ambivalence in the novel. That is feminism itself appears to have been viewed in certain contexts with certain ambivalence. An overtly political fable, *The Handmaid's Tale* shows how in Atwood's fiction formalist concerns and political ones are never separate and this is a paradoxical postmodern phenomenon. If *Cat's Eye* is a woman painter's cynical retrospective principally on her relationships with other women and feminism, *The Handmaid's Tale* is most often labelled feminist dystopia. The novel is offered as a prediction of the future only if its warnings against oppressive central powers to mute protest are ignored.

The world of Gilead is not quite an inevitable destiny. *The Handmaid's Tale* resists labels that place it within a particular generic stream. The maintenance of a multiple identity is shown in the novel to be part of a policy of subversion of the dominant. The perspective given by the final chapter, that what we grasp as a single text is in fact a reassembled account from a surviving jumble of cassette recordings, shows how the novel reiterates its uncertain, problematic relations with the concept of a single reality, one identity, a truthful history as propagated by the political orthodoxy of Gilead. There are four levels of narrative time in *The Handmaid's Tale*. One of them is the pre-revolution past characterized by the narrator's memories of her childhood with her mother, her student days with Moira, her memories of her daughter, and her relationship with Luke. The second level of narrative time refers to the period of revolution itself and the time immediately subsequent to it. At yet another level we have the Gileadean time. It is this narratorial period that is interrupted by the dream sequences. The Gileadean present is what the narrator is telling her tale about, although the events at this present are still retold as past occurrences narrated retrospectively. At the fourth level we have the time of the present, the period of the Symposium of Gileadean studies. The novel suggests that the privileging of history, in the form of authentic first person account of the past, as something more truthful and accurate than fiction, is fallacious. The narrator insists that the tale she is telling is a reconstruction which is going to be at some level inaccurate, partial, incomplete, because it is retrospective. But she suggests that this status, neither wholly fact nor complete fiction, is something that her story has in common with other historiographic metanarratives. *The Handmaid's Tale* is dystopian fiction, but also historiographic metafiction with a confessional journal-style first person narrator.

Many novels of Atwood deal with woman's experience in a male-dominated culture. They present the woman caught in oppressive stereotypes and they show how some women struggle to create a female space for themselves. This may be done through autonomy of thought through self definition and reconstruction of the self, through bonding among women, and through a refusal to take up the victim position or the role of subjugation.

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